

## A NOTE ON THE "LETTER TO THE EMIR" OF NICHOLAS MYSTICUS

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SOME years ago I discussed<sup>1</sup> the letter of the Patriarch Nicholas Mysticus which stands first in the editions of Mai and Migne;<sup>2</sup> and I pointed out that, though this letter is superscribed "To the renowned and most splendid Emir of Crete, our beloved friend,"<sup>3</sup> the addressee was in fact the Saracen Caliph (sc. al-Muktadir, 908-932) at Bagdad.

At the end of my article (p. 275) I indicated, but was not then able to solve, a chronological puzzle provided by the text. The puzzle is, briefly, this: the Saracens, commanded by the renegade Admiral Damian, have made a destructive raid on Cyprus, in retaliation for the slaughter of some Cypriot Saracens by the Byzantine commander Himerios. Nicholas Mysticus rebukes the Caliph for revenging the crime of Himerios on innocent Cypriot Christians, who had nothing to do with the matter; and asks why the Saracens do not take vengeance on the author of the deed, Himerios himself? "Why on this account do you make war on the Cypriots, and empty out your wrath on them? Why, instead of paying back his deeds on the man who has wronged you, do you pay back your wrongs on those who have done you none? ... *instead of fighting Himerios* are you to make war on these?"<sup>4</sup> A glance at the dates will show why Nicholas' language here is hard to understand. In the very next paragraph of his letter<sup>5</sup> he refers unambiguously to the death of the Saracen Admiral

Damian, which, as we know from Ibn al-Atir,<sup>6</sup> cannot have taken place before August 913, at the very earliest. However, at least fifteen months before this time<sup>7</sup> Himerios had in fact been fought and defeated, on his way back from Crete, by this very Damian and his colleague Leo of Tripoli, and had subsequently died in prison at Constantinople. How then can Nicholas, with any show of reason, accuse the Saracens of *not fighting Himerios*, but merely of taking vengeance for his crimes on some innocent Cypriots?

In his criticism of my article Professor Dölger wrote:<sup>8</sup> "Die von J. bemerkte chronologische Schwierigkeit ... scheint mir nicht zu bestehen; die Frage des Patriarchen dürfte rein dialektisch sein und nur den Grundsatz unterstreichen wollen, dass die Bestrafung eines Unrechts sich nur gegen den Schuldigen richten könne." Professor Canard, for his part, explains the discrepancy thus:<sup>9</sup> "... Nicolas veut peut-être simplement dire qu'au moment où il (Damian) châtiât les Chypriotes, il aurait dû plutôt poursuivre Himerios, ce qu'il n'a fait qu'ensuite."

With the highest respect to these eminent authorities, their explanations seem to me to be most improbable, if not absolutely impossible. How could any man of sense, let alone a statesman such as Nicholas, deliberately leave himself open to the obvious and crushing retort, "We *did* fight Himerios and totally defeated him"? I feel sure that the solution lies elsewhere.

<sup>1</sup> "The Mission of St. Demetrianus of Cyprus to Bagdad," *Mélanges H. Grégoire*, I (AIPHO 9, 1949), 267-275.

<sup>2</sup> *Spicilegium Romanum*, 10, 161-167; MPG, CXI, cols. 27-36.

<sup>3</sup> MS Patm. 178 fol. 70<sup>r</sup>, Τῷ περιδόξῳ καὶ λαμπροτάτῳ ἀμυρᾷ τῆς Κρήτης καὶ ἡγαπημένῳ φίλῳ: MS Vindobon. phil. gr. 342, fol. 14<sup>v</sup>, Τῷ ἀμυρᾷ Κρήτης. The title is wrongly given in the editions, owing to a misreading of MS Vat. gr. 1780 (f. 83<sup>r</sup>), a copy of Patm. 178.

<sup>4</sup> MPG, CXI, col. 33 C-D.

<sup>5</sup> MPG, CXI, col. 36 A.

<sup>6</sup> A. A. Vasiliev, *Byzance et les Arabes*, II, 2 (Brussels, 1950), 145.

<sup>7</sup> For the chronology of Himerios' last expedition, see my article "The Date of Leo VI's Cretan Expedition," Προσφορά εἰς Στ. Π. Κυριακίδην: Ἑλληνικά, παράρτημα (Thessalonike, 1953), 277-281.

<sup>8</sup> *Byzantinische Zeitschrift*, 43 (1950), 437.

<sup>9</sup> *Bulletin d'études orientales*, 13 (1949-1951), 65, note 4.

The only possible explanation seems to be that the passage about the Saracens "not fighting Himerios" (and, with it, the main text of the letter) was written before the news of Himerios' defeat reached Constantinople, that is, before or during the first days of May 912.<sup>10</sup> If this is so, then the paragraph which refers to Damian's death<sup>11</sup> is an addition, made at least fifteen months later, to the original draft. A careful study of the text seems to bear out this interpretation.

Damian's raid on Cyprus took place during four months in the year August 911–August 912.<sup>12</sup> The defeat of Himerios, on his way back from Crete, took place in late April or early May 912. If, therefore, Nicholas wrote his original protest against the first of these events while still ignorant of the second, then the raid on Cyprus took place during four months between August 911 and April 912. The language of Nicholas' letter implies a recent event, not one which had occurred two years before. It is true that little significance can be attached to uses of the perfect tense, such as ἐξηρήμωται καὶ ἀπόλωλε,<sup>13</sup> since the temporal distinction between perfect and preterite was no longer strictly observed in tenth-century Greek. But in the final paragraph<sup>14</sup> we find, βίας . . . τῆς χθὲς καὶ πρώην ἐπιτεθειμένης αὐτοῖς, "the violence inflicted only yesterday upon them [the Cypriots]."<sup>15</sup> Moreover, tenses are used elsewhere in the text which make it clear that at the time of writing Nicholas regards both Damian and Himerios as still alive. At col. 32 A Damian is described as τὸ τῶν Σαρακηνῶν σέβας νοθεύοντος, "one who is a disgrace to the Saracen religion"; while at col. 33 B we find, εἰ δὲ κατ' οὐδένα τρόπον Ἡμέριος τοῖς Κυπρίοις συντάσσεται, "but if Himerios is in no way connected with the Cypriots." All this is in contrast to the testimony of the interpolated paragraph,<sup>16</sup>

in which Damian is not merely stated to be dead, but also to have died after a long and wasting illness (ἀρρώστια . . . κατὰ μικρὸν δαπανῶσα) which attacked him after his raid on Cyprus.

The main text of the letter was, therefore, written in the spring of 912 and, for readily understandable reasons, never dispatched. It was resurrected sometime between August 913 and February 914,<sup>17</sup> brought up to date by a reference to Damian's recent death and the shipwreck of his fleet, and sent off to Bagdad in support of the mission, perhaps headed by St. Demetrianos, which had already been dispatched to the Caliph. The reasons why it was not sent, in its original form,<sup>18</sup> in 912 were probably the arrival of news of Himerios' defeat and the death of the Emperor Leo VI immediately afterwards, which threw everything into confusion.

But the chief interest of this piece of detection lies elsewhere. If at the beginning of May 912 Nicholas was taking an active part in public affairs, as this letter shows, then he must, after all, have been recalled to the patriarchal throne, or at least to patriarchal functions, by Leo VI himself, and not, as the Chronicler states,<sup>19</sup> by Alexander after Leo's death. Other evidence pointing to this conclusion was rejected by Runciman<sup>20</sup> and Ostrogorsky;<sup>21</sup> but at least three separate (if not wholly independent) statements to this effect are extant. The first and most important is of course that of Nicholas himself.<sup>22</sup> Writing to Pope Anastasius in 912, he said: "For when God had already stretched forth His hand upon the good emperor [Leo], he, being near the end of his life, found for himself (as I trust in

<sup>17</sup> Canard, *op. cit.*, 65.

<sup>18</sup> In the copy finally sent, the paragraph about Damian's death doubtless took the place of the preceding paragraph, Τί οὖν διὰ τοῦτο κτλ. Here, as elsewhere in this Collection (cf. *Byzantion*, 31 [1961], 76), the surviving version goes back to the uncorrected draft preserved in the patriarchal files.

<sup>19</sup> Theophanes Continuatus (Bonn ed.), 377–378.

<sup>20</sup> *The Emperor Romanus Lecapenus* (Cambridge, 1929), 45.

<sup>21</sup> *History of the Byzantine State* (Oxford, 1956), 231, note 2.

<sup>22</sup> MPG, CXI, col. 217 D; cf. V. Grumel, *Les registres*, no. 635.

<sup>10</sup> See the article cited in note 7 *supra*, pp. 280–281.

<sup>11</sup> MPG, CXI, col. 36 A–B: σκέψαι δὲ . . . προσείρηται.

<sup>12</sup> Canard, *op. cit.*, 63, note 5.

<sup>13</sup> MPG, CXI, col. 32 A.

<sup>14</sup> MPG, CXI, col. 36 C.

<sup>15</sup> Cf. MPG, CV, col. 145 D, where the phrase χθὲς καὶ πρώην is used of an interval of three days only.

<sup>16</sup> Col. 36 A.

the Divine Favor) an escape from the condemnation and the anathema: for he acknowledged his own transgression, and implored pardon and release from the ban which I had laid upon him, and gave me back the flock from which I had been expelled, and entrusted all things to be administered by me as I thought pleasing to God and in conformity with the holy canons." The Patriarchal Catalogue<sup>23</sup> gives the same evidence. Lastly, the *Annales* of Eutychius<sup>24</sup> state: *Porro Leo imperator, morbo gravi correptus, cum moriturum se timeret, mittens, Nicolaum patriarcham, quem loco moverat, accersivit, ipsius gratiam ambiens, ac ipsum cathedrae restituit.*

This *morbus gravis* of Leo, as we know from the Chronicler,<sup>25</sup> had set in before Ash Wednesday (March 4) 912. The Emperor knew he was doomed, and scarcely hoped to last until Easter (April 12), though in fact he did not die till May 11. If Nicholas' statement is accepted (and the letter to the Caliph, in its original form, seems to confirm it), then he was recalled by Leo in or about March 912. Hergenröther accepted this,<sup>26</sup> but thought it possible that the recall was due, not to Leo, who was already too ill to govern, but to Alexander during his brother's lifetime.

This leaves open the question of the position of the Patriarch Euthymios during the period March-May 11, 912. Once again we must regret the missing quaternion in the *Vita Euthymii*,<sup>27</sup> which no doubt explained the circumstances. That Nicholas' recall to patriarchal duties was not accompanied by Euthymios' resignation, is certain.<sup>28</sup> We therefore have to assume, during these few weeks, the anomalous situation of a titular patriarch (Euthymios) and a *de facto*

patriarch responsible for administration (Nicholas). This seems so odd a situation that it could hardly be assumed without a precedent. But there was an exact precedent for it, which had occurred less than forty years before, and which Leo VI well remembered: namely, the recall of, and the exercise of patriarchal functions by, Photius while Ignatius was still titular patriarch.<sup>29</sup> "As things were," says Professor Dvornik,<sup>30</sup> "it is quite possible that Photius actually exercised patriarchal functions in the last months before Ignatius' death"; and he adds,<sup>31</sup> "Photius would in this way have been a sort of 'coadjutor cum jure successionis'; and as a matter of fact there was after Ignatius' death neither synod nor election of a new Patriarch, Photius automatically taking possession of the throne."

It is likely that Leo, who had expressed his approval of his father's conduct in recalling Photius,<sup>32</sup> and who, in his final sickness, was doubtless unwilling to die with the Church still at odds over his fourth marriage, used this precedent in an attempt to patch up the quarrel. The sequel, it is true, was different. Euthymios was unlucky enough to survive Leo, and had to suffer brutal deposition and torture from his rancorous enemies. But this does not affect Leo's intention in recalling Nicholas. And our analysis of the composition of the "Letter to the Emir" enables us to confirm, at least in this particular, the veracity of Nicholas Mysticus.<sup>33</sup>

<sup>29</sup> See Vogt-Hausherr, "Oraison funèbre de Basile I," *Orientalia Christiana*, 26 (1932), 19 and 62/22-26.

<sup>30</sup> *The Photian Schism* (Cambridge, 1948), 172: see *ibid.*, 167-169.

<sup>31</sup> *Ibid.*, 172, note 1.

<sup>32</sup> Vogt-Hausherr, *loc. cit.*

<sup>33</sup> See also Karlin-Hayter, *Byzantion*, 32 (1962), pp. 320-1, though nothing said there is inconsistent with Nicholas' recall as *de facto* patriarch by Leo VI; and now N. Oikonomidès, "La dernière volonté de Léon VI au sujet de la Tétragamie" (*Byzantinische Zeitschrift*, 56 [1963], 46-52), which reaches the same conclusion about Nicholas' reinstatement by another route. This may be held to settle the matter.

<sup>23</sup> F. Fischer, *De Patriarcharum C[on]polit[an]orum Catalogis* (1884), 292.

<sup>24</sup> MPG, CXI, col. 1150 D.

<sup>25</sup> Theophanes Continuatus, 377.

<sup>26</sup> *Photius*, III (Regensburg, 1869), 667-668.

<sup>27</sup> Ed. by De Boor (Berlin, 1888), 61; ed. by Karlin-Hayter (*Byzantion*, 25-27 [1955-57]), 118.

<sup>28</sup> *Ibid.*